



# OSWER Innovations Pilot

## *Retail Buyer Training on Recycled-Content Products*

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*The Office of Solid Waste and Emergency Response (OSWER) initiated a series of innovative pilots to test new ideas and strategies for environmental and public health protection to make OSWER programs more efficient, effective, and user-friendly. A small amount of money is set aside to fund creative proposals. The creative projects test approaches to waste minimization, energy recovery, recycling, land revitalization, and homeland security that may be replicated across various sectors, industries, communities, and regions. We hope these pilots will pave the way for programmatic and policy recommendations by demonstrating the environmental and economic benefits of creative, innovative approaches to the difficult environmental challenges we face today.*

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### BACKGROUND

Numerous resources have been devoted to studying and promoting the collection and processing elements of recycling, but the buying of recycled-content products has been largely overshadowed by other focus areas. “Buy recycled” initiatives at retailers have focused mainly on point-of-purchase displays, shelf talkers, and other temporary projects. Few, if any, programs have looked at the retailer buyer, who actually makes purchasing decisions. To promote recycled-content goods, several states and other organizations have created online product directories of recycled-content products that usually target a small percentage of consumers willing to seek out these products. However, for the companies that sell and resell these products, price and performance still trump the green attributes of recycled-content paper, plastic, and other goods.

The Recycling Association of Minnesota (RAM)—with EcoSource as the trainer—successfully carried out a small pilot training program for Minnesota retailers in 1998-1999 that addresses this problem. The pilot resulted in measurable sales of recycled-content products to several Minnesota retailers. Expand the retail buyer training to include additional retailers in adjoining states is a logical next step.

### PILOT APPROACH

U.S. EPA, in partnership with RAM and EcoSource, will link vendors of recycled-content products with buyers from major retailers to increase the amount of

recycled-content products available for consumer purchase. The U.S. EPA will help expand RAM’s existing pilot training program to include discount, grocery, hardware, and other retailers in Illinois and Wisconsin. Cooperating organizations in Illinois and Wisconsin include the Illinois Recycling Association and WasteCap Wisconsin.

The half-day training program will link vendors of recycled-content products with buyers from major retailers after educating the buyers about recycled-content products. The training breaks down buyer stereotypes about the performance, quality, and price of recycled-content products. The buyers then immediately meet vendors at a “product fair” so that they can see many mainstream products. Buyers and vendors can then begin negotiations and sales. RAM proposes to expand the training to at least one major retailer in Wisconsin or Illinois that owns or supplies at least 20 stores in the region. The goal will be to sell five new recycled-content products at that retailer.

### INNOVATION

The retailer buyer training concept, a public-private partnership, has never been done except through RAM’s pilot program. This project will expand an existing idea to two additional states in the region. This project is ready for expansion based on the successes and lessons learned from the original, smaller-scale pilot.

The project is innovative because it focuses on retailer buyers instead of store staff or just consumers. As

vendors adopt the idea of buying recycled products and advocate this environmentally friendly behavior to their customers (retailers) and the buying public, a public sector goal is effectively translated into a private sector goal. Integrating the “buy recycled” messages into the supply chain is one way to make EPA’s waste programs more efficient and effective.

## **BENEFITS**

Expanding RAM’s pilot program to include retailers from Illinois and Wisconsin will help achieve a broader impact and make the program more sustainable. Expanded retail buyer training will serve as a catalyst for developing better buyer-seller relationships that lead to successful deals. This Pilot will increase the amount of recycled-content products available for consumer purchase and ultimately will build public support for environmental stewardship. By increasing the market for recycled consumer products, the Pilot will result in a reduction in the use of virgin products or packaging.

## **CONTACTS**

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For additional information, visit the EPA OSWER Innovations web site at: [www.epa.gov/oswer/IWG.htm](http://www.epa.gov/oswer/IWG.htm).